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ABSTRACT

Traditionally journalism history has been male-oriented and has operated on the assumptions that journalism history is about winning, autonomy, and change. Two corollary assumptions hidden in post journalism history are (1) proper journalism history should focus on action, not consequence of action; and (2) history should be explained in terms of rationality rather than feeling. Admitting an enlarged discourse between arenas permitted to women and those allowed to men might produce a more inclusive history incorporating action and consequence, thinking and feeling, victory and despair. The introduction of women's perspective for these assumptions may provoke a re-evaluation of journalism history as traditionally composed and challenge the idea that the writing of such history must of necessity be organized around underlying premises involving conflict, autonomy, and change. Integrating the experience of women with the experience of men would emphasize failure and despair as well as success and progress, bonding and community as well as conflict and impact, and rhythms of repetition and return as well as innovation and change. Such a history may convey an enlarged sense of the complexity and wonder in any human undertaking. (HOD)

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Journalism History and Women's Experience: A Problem in Conceptual Change

by

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A. Introduction

Over the past three centuries the writing of American journalists has produced a major cultural form in American life. Yet the history of that work and representative form has been recorded and interpreted primarily in terms of the perceptions of half the American population -- those of men. A great deal of what is experienced by both men and women in journalism has not been recorded by historians or has been recorded in ways compatible with thought patterns and values characteristic of white American males.

Challenging such a pattern, I believe, requires a kind of intellectual breakthrough to recognize some of the premises, mostly unconscious, of journalism historians, both men and women.

This essay proposes, therefore, to 1) isolate and examine some value assumptions of journalism history as it has been traditionally written from the male perspective and 2) approach that history with some new organizing values suggested by the experience of women. This approach assumes, obviously, that the experiences historically associated with and attributed to men and women have been significantly different, and that such divergent experience has produced divergent thinking and valuing. An integration of these perspectives may permit us to recognize a greater variety of experience as appropriate material, and to conceptualize that experience in a more generously human pattern.

B. The Nature of Intellectual Breakthrough

Much scholarly work has recently focused on the idea of intellectual breakthrough, stimulated by the tumult over the work of Thomas S. Kuhn, the historian of science who challenged scientists' belief that their work necessarily involved a straight-line progression of inquiry toward truth. Actually, said Kuhn, a community of scientists organizes itself around a dominant "paradigm," a set of traditions or principles for conceptualizing reality. As aspects of the old paradigm grow increasingly difficult to justify, community restlessness grows, and thought eventually crystallizes around a new paradigm.[1]

What interests me in Kuhn particularly is a central implication of his argument as teased out by Thomas L. Haskell, that paradigms are shaped by the unrealized assumptions of the group. Except in periods of revolution, says Kuhn, scientists do not recognize the influence of assumptions on what they consture as appropriate problems, appropriate evidence, and as fit criteria for judgment. If, says Haskell, "even scientists are firmly tethered to their deepest-lying assumptions, as Kuhn suggests, then so is everyone else. It follows that historians ought to assign a high priority indeed to the exploration of these controlling presuppositions that shape thought, and thus behavior, in every sphere of life." I suggest such an exploratbn specifically for those in journalism history who in the past dozen years have engaged in arduous scrutiny of their field.[2]

Identifying assumptions is a messy and difficult business, however and revolutions are hard to come by. How can we, lacking a revolution, step outside our own skins and suddenly perceive the hidden beliefs that shape our understanding?

At this point another approach to the problem becomes relevant. Since Biblical times the western imagination has been gripped by the idea of the encounter of an established community with a "stranger." In those days strangers appeared mysteriously, wings scarcely covered. Sometimes they would engage with humans in talk or combat, leaving their antagonists breathless, smitten in body perhaps, but dazzled by new vision. Visits from angels have been reported only rarely since -- most recently, perhaps, in close encounters on film -- but the alluring concept of "stranger" has persisted with its promise of expanded understanding. Such a stranger, if able to resist conversion to group convictions, may uniquely question or violate sacred beliefs and traditions. This stranger appears to be one who is both near and distant, who participates in group activities but not as a native, and whose imported experiences may jar the group into a fresh look at its assumptions.[3]

The idea of encounter between group and stranger also suggests a different nature of inquiry. Instead of a linear build-up of knowledge, it provokes a "dialectical inquiry," a continued exchange of opposing judgments which do not cancel each other out but, when reconciled, may provide a richer, more complex view.[4]

For a moment, then, imagine as our community the group of traditional journalism historians. Their values are rooted in two institutions, those of academe and those of the newspaper and electronic media they chronicle. As is true with other communities of American historians, the group's values have grown, I believe, from male experience on physical and intellectual frontiers where aggressiveness brought victory and victory brought prestige. The community cherishes, therefore, individual initiative, autonomy and enterprise. Stasis is

the enemy. Public life is the arena in which individual qualities are tried and reputations made; private life and personal feelings are hidden away. Having flourished in an expansive, pragmatic American environment, the group values action rather than contemplation, practice rather than theory, and change rather than conservatism. Reduced to elemental blacks and whites, such a male value-set has been adopted by journalism historians, both men and woman, as a proper professional focus. Further, even such a schematic outline as I have offered helps account for the way journalism history has been written, for its choice of worthy subjects, and for its valid interpretive themes.

If we further assume that white, male historians have imposed their idealized selves on their materials, we may identify three of their guiding assumptions. Though the implications of these assumptions interlock, they may be separated out and identified roughly as functional, structural and temporal in nature.

One: traditional journalism history is about winning. Two: traditional journalism history is about autonomy. Three: traditional journalism history is about change.

A look at Emery's contents pages affirms the fascination of these themes for one influential historian. To wit: "The press wins a beachhead;" the "rise of the fourth estate;" the "press and the expanding nation;" the race for news;" "champions....great and colorful,' and most emphatically, a "revolution in communication." (Italics mine.)[5]

I do not contend, of course, that these choices reflect the only experiences that males have had, or that they are exclusively male, or the only themes chosen by historians of journalism. Many contrasting examples may be cited. I do assert that these represent powerful under-

lying notions of significance in shaping community practice.

Let us imagine woman approaching the community that is writing this kind of history, then, woman bearing values from her own kinds of experience over the centuries. This imagined encounter provides an opportunity for almost playful selection and juxtaposition of values -- the better to elicit a sense of discovery and surprise.[6]

What specific themes from women's past experience might best challenge this kind of history? What contrary perceptions of history might arise? What transcending interpretations? How would the new history read?

The answers involve difficulties. Feminist historians have worked primarily either on the history of women in isolation or on adding more women to history as traditionally conceived. The very language and mode of expression in which scholars formulate new concepts arise from the intellectual history of males. Much work remains to be done. However, insights from such diverse fields as black history and art history may be used as experimental probes.[7]

C. The First Assumption: Journalism Is About Winning.

This theme is particularly appropriate to narrative, a form characteristically selected by journalism historians to convey meaning. Story coalesces easily around conflict; conflict culminates in victory or loss. Heroes can easily be chosen from the dominant and victorious. "Freedom" is the prize.[8]

Tables of contents from the standard shelf fairly bristle with conflict. Take any book -- Meyer Berger's History of the New York Times came first to my hand when I tried this experiment. Sample topics: "Raymond's Beat on Webster's Speech;" "The Times in Full Cry Against Tweed," "Van Anda Finds an Einstein Error," or "Property Rights in the News Upheld." Or the first sentence in Emery's fourth edition: "Journalism history is the story of humanity's long struggle to communicate freely...."[9]

Other themes of course entertwine. But a dominant value is attached to

conflict and a primary focus bears on the victor. Such interpretation obscures a dark wealth of human experience -- weakness, vulnerability, helplessness, failure. Conflict history is one-dimensional; only biographers seem able to admit the continuing realities of sorrow and despair. Here certain innovative historians of black life suggest that suffering, endurance and tragedy have always been present in all American experience; they have only been ignored, for the most part, by white historians of the national scene caught up in the omnipresent optimism of the culture. (Indeed, blacks and women have typically been the bearers of the hidden, the suppressed, and the undesirable in our culture.) When the outline of such experience is fitted down as a sort of grid over the materials of journalism history, new perspectives emerge.[10]

Suppose, for example, one uses the new assumptions in reviewing the case of John Peter Zenger, hero of press freedom. Zenger becomes not a hero, but a German immigrant to New York considered bumbling and inadequate by the once-rich and powerful individuals who use him and his printing press in an attempt to bolster their own flagging social and economic power. These men allow Zenger to rot for months in jail, taking no public responsibility for the journal they have organized, financed, and edited. Chief among these individuals is an attorney and land-speculator, James Alexander, who elaborates what will become noted theories of "press freedom" in the context of his own passionate encounter with royal authority. His challenge appears motivated less from a concern for public interest than from his own deeply private sense of failure and his too-human feelings of anger and frustration, greed and fear. One dwells in that climactic court-room scene, <u>not</u> on the victorious defense attorney, Alexander Hamilton, born off by the crowds to a mammoth celebration at the Black Horse tavern, but on Zenger, led haplessly back to jail to be kept there until next day. Thereafter his business dwindles and he comes to an untimely death. More such losers' history might add a more profound

sense of human reality to our work.[11]

Once one switches focus, two corollary assumptions hidden in the old journalism history begin to appear. One is that proper journalism history should focus on action, not consequence of action; the other, that history should be explained in terms of rationality rather than feeling.[12]

Disregard of the consequences of action in the historians' interpretive system seems directly to parallel newsroom value choices. There, publication is a positive virtue. The editor's old rule of thumb puts it succinctly: "Refusal to publish cannot be justified on the basis of foreseeable harm." Action is the thing, not refusal to act for whatever predicted consequence.[13]

Historians have also devalues consequences. Suppose a media history of sensationalism. Historians have written reams about the publication of sensationalism; almost nothing about the victims of sensationalism. Suppose in contrast a history organized from the perspective of Mrs. Joseph Warren, trapped in the spotlight of the sensationalist press of the 1880's. Or out of the anguish of Anne Morrow Lindberg's life in the early 1930's made hideous by an interfering press corps after the kidnapping of her child. Or of Rose Kennedy, looking up on the morning after her son's assassination in 1968 to see journalists' heads and cameras poked over the Hyannisport compound wall to witness her grief. From such vantage points one would erect quite different systems of historical explanation.[14]

All consequences of publication are not evil; historically, however, we know little about them. Certainly new techniques for illuminating the history of the inarticulate should make such organizing perspectives from readers, viewers, subjects and sources more accessible.

Journalism history has always, to pursue the second corollary, appeared embarrassed by the personal and the emotional. Incorporating a history of

feelings into the history of journalism would be like crying in public; it would make everyone uncomfortable. The private and the affective should be hustled off-stage. A classic evocation of the attitude comes in the old newsroom soubriquet, "sob-sister," conveying effectively a mixture of condescension and unease. Stories with emotional content are for women, and both stories and women, while necessary in the material sense, are only marginally relevant to the rational business of the newsroom day.[15]

Only in rare work such as that of Warren Francke and Kenneth Nordin does one see the idea of sensationalism (in the sense of "appealing to feelings" which Francke conveys) as a continuing valid ingredient in human life and in journalism, not something freakishly cyclical to be mentioned, deplored, and swept under the rug. Admitting an enlarged discourse between arenas permitted to women and those allowed to men might produce a more inclusive history incorporating action and consequence, thinking and feeling, victory and despair.[16]

D. The Second Assumption: Journalism History Is About Autonomy

Journalism history has classically celebrated independence and individual autonomy rather than subordination and dependence. The actions of strikingly autonomous individuals have been chronicled. "Freedom" has been valued as an existential state.

As opposed to the typical image of the solitary and untrammeled American male, contrast the relationships which women have symbolized over the centuries -- concord, harmony, affiliation, community -- the binding and sustaining qualities that serve to weld individual elements into a complex whole.[17]

Such a complex symbolism challenges the propensity of journalism historians to fragment the lives of their protagonists, isolating for attention only the professional experience of individuals, lifting it out of the whole rich mosaic of their professional, family and personal lives. Only in the work

of such younger scholars as Susan Henry do we have the beginnings of a scholar ship which calls attention to the importance of family and community networks to professional practice, and the shapinginter-relationships between personal and occupational life.[18]

In the same fashion, historians have concentrated on the individual journalist and tended to ignore communities of journalists that have shared ideologies. One such "communitarian perspective" exemplified by Progressive journalists has recently been highlighted in the work of Clifford Christians, Quentin J. Schultze and Norman H. Sims, a promising approach.[19]

Certainly as in the case of previous assumptions discussed here, one does not generalize rashly. Old-boy networks have flourished; joint enterprises have prospered. But only an occasional perceptive scholar such as Richard Schwarzlose in his studies of press associations furnishes material allowing analysis of such phenomena.[20]

In the same tradition, journalism and government have been most typically construed as independent antagonists in the "military" model of history as conflict. But suppose one transcended the conflict model. Then the very nature of classes of the two antagonists might be interpreted as evidence of their common membership in a larger community of interest within, for example, the democratic ethos.

Perhaps the greatest departure from contemporary patterns of interpretation would manifest itself in a fresh view of the provincial press, long slighted by scholars intent on the metropolitan media. Perhaps one reason for ignoring the smaller papers comes from the newsroom itself where journalists consider the adversary stance the hall-mark of excellence, denigrating the community press because independent, "hard-nosed" reporting is impossible within the constraints of small-town life.[21]

But if one regards the press as significant for quite contrary reasons, for welding relationships and providing a vital sense of place and connection for a nomadic breed of Americans, the community newspapers acquire new lustre. An allied interpretation of the whole press was suggested a half-century ago by historian Lucy Salmon. Newspapers, she asserted, were significant in providing a "sense of relationships, values and relative proportions," allowing readers to discern the "meaning of their times." Long in eclipse, such a perspective could serve as a fruitful contemporary approach.[22]

A substantial sense of the way in which not only journalists but journalism itself serve to maintain structures and preserve relationships is missing from our writing. Encompassing the complementary modes of autonomy and affiliation may open unexplored territory which might well present whole new perspectives to our study.

E. Third Assumption: Journalism History Is About Progress and Change.

Journalism historians have chronicled a steady and cumulative expansion of power, a progress, a record of change. Here are some of the catch phrases from a recently published text describing the 19th century: the spread of printing, the new mass press, progress in communication, new uses for pictures, press trends in changing America.[23] An entire century, packaged on the neat and tidy assumption that significance comes in progress and change. Such a linear and dynamic bias characterizes almost all western history. Unevenness in the rate of change is the primary concern of historians, says Laurence Veysey, speaking for the academic guild. "We want to know why change fails to arrive in the quiet periods, why it occurs so rapidly when it does come." The value judgment here is strikingly evident in the definition: change is the assumed constant. Lack of change is "failure." Even the Annalistes chronicle change, albeit in tiny increments.[24]

A sharply contrasting implication comes with invocation of a different

sense of time, time perceived as revolving in slow and majestic cycles, time marked by repeated episodes and recurring motifs. Such a sense, certain art historians argue, is particularly consonant with the repetitive rhythms of tasks anciently assigned to women, seeding, hoeing, weaving, spinning, rocking the cradle, tending to the meals. Echoes can be heard in the voices of modern women. "There are cycles," said Frances T. Farenthold in 1979 as she left the presidency of Wells College, "and I have carried in my heart for six months the knowledge that my cycle at Wells was drawing to a close." Not the kind of statement to the press, somehow, that one would expect from a male college president.[25]

It is provocative to imagine the subjects and themes that could emerge, were this sense of time imposed on journalism history. Certainly the essential patterning of journalism as repetitive, cyclical and periodic would leap to prominence. One would itch to study the implications of repeated messages over time, of repetitive forms, of reiterated values. In this view the press would signify also as a conservator of values, not in its usual assumed role as enunciator of the new, as inciter of change.

Aside from Emergy's cycles of sensationalism, this sense has surfaced among press historians only fleetingly and that usually in pejorative reference. See Allan Nevins, for example, remarking that historians have "failed to emphasize properly the stupid conservatism of most of the press, its blind attachment to the status quo, and especially the economic status quo." Or Timothy Crouse in contemptuous evocation of journalism as the "slowest-moving, most tradition-bound profession in America," or Tom Wolfe's satiric metaphor for the press of the 1950's as the "consummate hypocritical Victorian gent."[26]

Suppose, however, that the press were to be valued rather than derided for its encouragement of conservative values of coherence and stability? Suppose it were viewed as analogous to that other essentially conservative institution

which also on occasion breeds startling change, the law? A kind of dialectic of continuity and change, operating in powerful alternative cycles, could add depth and complexity to the classic account.

The introduction of women's perspective proposed for all the assumptions discussed here may provoke a re-evaluation of journalism history as traditionally composed and challenge the idea that the writing of such history must of necessity be organized around underlying premises involving conflict, autonomy and change. It proposes a history integrating the complementary insights arising from the experience of women with those derived from the experience of men. It emphasizes failure and despair as well as success and progress, bonding and community as well as conflict and impact, and rhythms of repetition and return as well as innovation and change. Such a history may convey an enlarged sense of the complexity and wonder in any human undertaking.

More, it may give us new insights into portions of ourselves that we have hidden or suppressed. This, in John Higham's words, is a bold and risky enterprise, but it may also "alone enable readers to confront their most basic presuppositions and to come to a clear sense of their broadest communal identity." Worthy goal for those who read and for those who write.[27]

NOTES

1. Thomas S. Kuhn, The Structure of Scientific Revolutions, rev. ed. (1962; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970).

2. Thomas L. Haskell, "Deterministic Implications," in John Higham and Paul K. Conkin, eds., New Directions in American Intellectual History (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1979), 141. For implications of Kuhn's thought to historians, see perceptive essays by Robert F. Berkhofer, Jr., "Does History Have a Future? The Challenge of New Ways of Understanding Past Human Behavior for Traditional Historical Analysis," (Delivered at the Organization of American Historians, Denver, April 19, 1974), and David A. Hollinger, "T. S. Kun's Theory of Science and Its Implications for History," American Historical Review 78 (April, 1974),370-393.

3. For shaping my thinking on the nature of intellectual breakthrough and particularly on the concept of "stranger", I am indebted to Charles Axelrod, Studies in Intellectual Breakthrough: Freud, Simmel, Buber (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1979), 1-13.

4. Axelrod, Studies in Intellectual Breakthrough, 4, 5, and 8.

5. Edwin Emery and Michael Emery, The Press and America: An Interpretative History of the Mass Media, 4th ed. (Englewood Cliffs, N. J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1978), vii-x.

6. Here I am not implying a specific woman's "nature" or implying that particular kinds of experience are exclusive to women. I am describing some experiences with which women have characteristically been associated or that have been attributed traditionally to women. See Zena Beth McGlashan's comment on "different" perceptions attributed to women, much of which "we now believe comes through the socialization of human beings." "The Evolving Status of Newspaperwomen" Ph.D. thesis, University of Iowa, 1978.

7. Jean Baker Miller, Toward A New Psychology of Women (Boston: Beacon Press, 1976), 94.

8. See James Carey on Whig history: "the story of frowth, expansion and consolidation of freedom," Review of George N. Gordon, The Communications Revolution,Journalism History 5 (Spring, 1978), 22.

9. Meyer Berger, The Story of the New York Times (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1951), vii-xii. Emery and Emery, The Press and America, xv.

10. "A study of the Afro-American past," Otey M. Scruggs points out, "with its tragedy and its irony, would do much to alter our romantic notion that the United States...has been destined...to escape thetragedies and ambiguities that have been the fate of other nations," in William G. Shade and Roy C. Herrenkohl, eds., Seven on Black: Reflections on the Negro Experience in America (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott Company, 1969), 18; Vincent Harding, "The Uses of the Afro-American Past," Negro Digest, (February, 1968), 22-25.

11. Catherine L. Covert,"'Passion Is Ye Prevailing Motive': the Feud Behind the Zenger Case," Journalism Quarterly 50 (Spring, 1973), 3-10.

NOTES (continued)

12. See for example such a statement as that of Fred Weinstein and Gerald M. Platt in The Wish to be Free: Society, Psyche and Value Change (1969; Berkeley, University of CaliforniaPress, 1st Paperback Edition, 1973), 1: "Classical western concepts of freedom characteristically assumed that man has rational control over his faculties, that he can order his actions and effect calculated changes in his environment...." Such a statement while treating major western assumptions also makes assumptions, i.e., that rationality and actions are valid central concepts around which to organize thought.

13. Clifford G. Christians and Catherine L. Covert, Teaching Ethics in Journalism Education (Hastings-on-Hudson, N.Y.: The Hastings Center, 1980), 43-45

14. Harold L. Nelson and Dwight L. Teeter, Jr. Law of Mass Communications: Freedom and Control of Print and Broadcast Media, 5th ed., (Mineola, N.Y.: The Foundation Press, Inc., 1969), 159; Anne Morrow Lindbergh, Locked Rooms and Open Doors; Diaries and Letters, 1933-1935 (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1974), 247-49; L. Bergquist, ed., "Visit with the Indomitable Rose Kennedy" Look 32 (Nov. 26, 1968), 25-34.

15. Miller, Psychology of Women, 38.

16. Warren Francke, "An Argument in Defense of Sensationalism, Probing the Popular and Historiographical Content," Journalism History 5 (Autumn, 1978), 70-73; Kenneth D. Nordin, "The Entertaining Press: Sensationalism in Eighteenth Century Boston Newspapers," Communication Research 6 (July, 1979), 295-320.

17. On the female figure as symbolizing communalism and concord, see Edward Muir, "Images of Power: Art and Pageantry in Renaissance Venice," The American Historical Review 84 (February, 1979), 18; on women as builders of community, see Gerda Lerner, The Majority Finds Its Past (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), 165.

18. Susan Henry, "Private Lives: An Added Dimension for Understanding Journalism History", Journalism History 6 (Winter, 1979-80), 98-102.

19. Clifford G. Christians, Quentin J. Schultze and Norman H. Sims, "Community, Epistomology and Mass Media Ethics," Journalism History 5 (Summer, 1978),

20. Richard A. Schwarzlose, "The Nation's First Wire Service: Evidence Supporting a Footnote," Paper delivered to the History Division, Association for Education in Journalism, Houston, Tex., August, 1979.

21. Loren Ghiglione, "Small-Town Journalism Has Some Big Ethical Headaches", in Bernard Rubin, Questioning Media Ethics (New York: Praeger, 1978), 171. Ghiglione can list closeness of the owner to the community and to the paper, the citizens' sense of the paper as almost literally belonging to them, lack of separation between paper and community as "major weaknesses,"as inhibiting investigative reporting.

22. Lucy Salmon, The Newspaper and the Historian (New York: Oxford University Press, 1923), 470.

23. George N. Gordon, The Communications Revolution: A History of Mass Media in the United States (New York: Hastings House,1977) v-viii.

NOTES (cont)

24. Laurence Veysey, "Intellectual History and theNew Social History," New Directions in American Intellectual History, 6-7.

25. Lucy R. Lippard, "Making Something from Nothing," Heresies, 1(Winter, 1977-78) 64. "Mrs. Farenthold to Resign Presidency of Wells College, New York Times, Oct. 13, 1979.

26. Allan Nevins, "Historical Treatment of U.S. Journalism," Journalism Quarterly 36 (1959), 411-517; Timothy Crouse, The Boys on the Bus (New York: Ballantine Books, 1972-73), 321; Tom Wolfe, The Right Stuff (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1979), 120.

27. John Higham, "Afterword", New Directions in American Intellectual History, 234.